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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 000360

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [ENRG](#) [ELAB](#) [EAID](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH'S NEW ADVISERS HAVE STRONG CREDENTIALS
BUT A LIMITED TIME TO ACHIEVE GOALS

REF: A. A) DHAKA 292

[1](#)B. B) DHAKA 102

Classified By: CDA a.i., Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Bangladesh's Caretaker Government (CTG) recently reshuffled its top leadership; it forced the resignation of five of eleven Advisers, named five new Advisers, and brought on board five Special Assistants to help the over-extended Council of Advisers. In the last several weeks the Charg d'Affaires a.i. met individually with the new Advisers and Special Assistants. In her meetings, the CDA a.i. emphasized USG support for the Caretaker Government's commitment to the roadmap for elections by the end of 2008. She also emphasized the need for adherence to international standards of human rights and due process, particularly with regard to the detention and prosecution of suspects investigated as part of the CTG's anti-corruption campaign. In general, she found the Advisers and Special Assistants to be well-briefed on their portfolios. With less than nine months left in the Caretaker Government's tenure, however, it remains to be seen how much the new team can accomplish, particularly as the government bureaucracy is highly inefficient. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) The CDA a.i., accompanied by Pol/Econ notetakers, met with five new Advisers: A.F. Hassan Ariff (responsible for the Ministries of Law, Justice and Parliament Affairs; and Religious Affairs), Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman (responsible for the Ministries of Commerce and Education), Maj. Gen. (ret'd.) Ghulam Quader (responsible for the Ministries of Communications, and Housing and Public Works), Dr. AMM Shawkat Ali (Ministries of Health and Family Welfare, and Food and Disaster Management), and Rasheda K. Chowdhury (Ministries of Primary and Mass Education; Cultural Affairs; and Women and Children's Affairs).

[1](#)3. (SBU) In the January re-shuffle the Caretaker Government (CTG) created five Special Assistant positions. Bangladesh law only provides for eleven Advisers (including the Chief Adviser) to run government ministries in the caretaker periods between elections, but the fact that this CTG's tenure has exceeded the usual 90 days has meant the Advisers are stretched thin to cover 30-plus ministries. To increase the capacity of the Council of Advisers without violating the legal limit of eleven Advisers, the CTG designated five Special Assistants to the Chief Adviser. The Special Assistants include: Prof. M. Tamim (responsible for the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources), Barrister Raja Devasish Roy (responsible for the Ministries of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, and Environment and Forests), Mahbub Jamil (responsible for the Ministries of Civil

Aviation and Tourism, Industry, and Youth and Sports), Manik Lal Samaddar (Ministries of Fisheries and Livestock, and Science and Information and Communication Technology), and Brig. Gen. MA Malek Mollah (Ministries of Post and Telecommunications, and Social Welfare). In addition to meeting the new Advisers and Special Assistants, the CDA a.i. also met with Maj. Gen. (ret'd) MA Matin, who has been an Adviser since January 2007 but who was given the important Home Affairs portfolio in the re-shuffle.

ADVISER FOR LAW, JUSTICE, AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

14. (C) In his meeting with the CDA a.i., Law Adviser Hassan Ariff said he was focused on ensuring the CTG adhered to high standards of human rights, and he highlighted his credentials as the former head of one of Bangladesh's main human rights NGOs, Odikhar. Due process and humane treatment of detainees in the anti-corruption campaign are top priorities, and he urged the USG to continue raise this issue publicly and privately. Ariff said he was encouraging other Advisers to support a further relaxation of the State of Emergency, which in his view is a key component for national elections later this year. Ariff said another priority is cementing the separation of the executive and judiciary, a key CTG achievement in 2007. He also said the GOB remained committed to passing anti-terrorism and updated anti-money-laundering legislation.

ADVISER FOR COMMERCE AND EDUCATION

15. (C) Hossain Zillur Rahman, a respected political-economist, identified several priorities, including tackling inflation and diversifying manufacturing in Bangladesh. He highlighted diversification opportunities in

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the areas of shipbuilding, textiles, plastics, pharmaceuticals and leather products. Rahman and the CDA a.i. discussed the pending GSP petition regarding labor rights in Bangladesh. Rahman agreed additional work is needed to guarantee worker rights and said the GOB was working on a unified response to the concerns raised in the petition. In general he said the business community is apprehensive about the future of Bangladesh's economy. In the area of education, Rahman confirmed he had helped to secure the release of Dhaka University professors detained for their role in the August 2007 riots, an issue that threatened to spill onto the streets in January 2008. (NOTE: The professors were released on January 21. END NOTE.) He said the political situation at the main universities is improved and that only a few members of fringe groups may be operating on the campuses. (NOTE: Rahman's sister-in-law teaches Bangla at the Department's Foreign Service Institute. END NOTE.)

ADVISER FOR COMMUNICATION, HOUSING AND PUBLIC WORKS

16. (C) Major General (ret.) Ghulam Quader, who formerly served as Director General of Bangladesh's National Security Intelligence (NSI) agency, discussed whether the political party Jamaat Islami should be permitted to participate in the upcoming elections because some of its members have been accused of war crimes during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War. Quader said excluding any group could result in serious problems, and party affiliation alone does not make someone a war criminal. Quader agreed with the CDA a.i. about the importance of relaxing the state of emergency and starting a dialogue with the political parties. He stressed the need to ensure the accomplishments of the caretaker government, particularly in the area of anti-corruption, survive after the transition to an elected government. Quader also discussed some of the projects in his portfolio, including efforts to restore a rail link between Dhaka and Kolkata, which is scheduled to open in mid-April.

FOOD, DISASTER MANAGEMENT, HEALTH, FAMILY WELFARE ADVISER

¶7. (C) AMM Shawkat Ali, who previously had a long career in Bangladesh's civil service, told the CDA a.i. cyclone relief continues to be a top priority. He praised immediate response efforts, including those of the USG but said reconstruction is going slowly. Getting food to cyclone victims continues to be a challenge, as does rebuilding livelihoods. Though Bangladesh has yet to experience a human case of avian influenza (AI), Ali expressed concern about the threat of AI. Programs to address nutrition and population growth are also on Ali's radar screen, and he thanked the USG for its help in this area through USAID. In the area of politics, Ali was critical of the CTG's handling of legal maneuvers in the corruption cases against former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia; he said he believed the government is on shaky legal ground in attempting to try the cases under the Emergency Power Rules.

ADVISER FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION, CULTURE, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

¶8. (C) Rasheda Chowdhury, who comes from an NGO background, expressed her opinion that basic education is a government responsibility, with space for participation by private actors. According to Chowdhury, the general preference for English-medium schooling cuts against the pursuit of social equity and inclusiveness. Her top priority is teacher training. Although the GOB is hiring an additional 16,000 teachers, there is limited capacity to train them. The solution she proposes is outsourcing teacher training to NGOs, in combination with decentralizing training to local levels. On the topic of child labor, Chowdhury indicated it could not be totally eliminated in Bangladesh (because of current levels of poverty), but the GOB accepts the International Labor Organizations' definitions of the worst forms of child labor as requiring action. She agreed alternative educational opportunities are needed, but that overall an inter-ministerial group on child labor was required for progress on this issue, with the Labor Ministry as the anchor ministry. Chowdhury and CDA a.i. also discussed the poor state of intellectual property rights (IPR) protection in Bangladesh; Chowdhury acknowledged that the Copyright Office, which is a part of the Ministry of Culture, lacks capacity to adequately address IPR violations.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR POWER, ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES

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¶9. (C) Prof. M. Tamim, a respected professor at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and the CDA a.i. discussed the issue of offshore natural gas exploration and the future of coal production in Bangladesh. The Charg raised concerns that the on-going dispute between Chevron and Petrobangla could discourage investors, as could a proposed tender for offshore natural gas exploration if the tender does not adhere to international standards.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR CHT, ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS

¶10. (C) Raja Devasish Roy, an ethnic Chakma from Rangamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), is the Chakma tribal chief as well as a prominent barrister and human rights activist. Roy said his top priority was tamping down tensions between indigenous CHT residents and the ethnic Bengali "settlers" until an elected government takes office again. He is promoting separation of the executive from the judiciary in the CHT, where the deputy commissioner appointed by the central government still has final say over most issues. On the issue of human rights, Roy said the military had a long-standing record of not being able to admit when they made mistakes, which explained their inability to apologize for abuses committed by soldiers. He also urged the U.S. to weigh in with the Bangladesh government on such issues as getting the military to lift its ban on cellphone coverage in the CHT, in order to promote development. (NOTE: We are planning to follow up with an inter-agency assessment of

opportunities for USG engagement in the CHT, including possible assistance for the ongoing food crisis in the region. (reftels) END NOTE.)

CIVIL AVIATION, TOURISM, INDUSTRY, SPORT SPECIAL ASSISTANT

¶11. (C) The inclusion of a well-respected businessman in the new CTG leadership was welcomed by many; Mahbub Jamil previously was a country and regional director for the U.S.'s Singer Corp. and a founding member of the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh. Now a Special Assistant, Jamil bemoaned to the CDA a.i. the glacial speed of the GOB's bureaucracy, noting he just signed off on a routine program that waited 13 years for approval. Jamil said improving Bangladesh's civil aviation sector, including national airline Biman and Dhaka's Zia International Airport, was one of his top priorities. (NOTE: Not long after this meeting, Biman's Board of Directors was re-constituted so that a majority of the board now comes from the private sector rather than government. Biman's recent decision to buy more than USD 1 billion in Boeing aircraft will be reported septel. END NOTE.) The CDA a.i. highlighted the importance of fair treatment of business by government; she noted that ongoing disputes like that between Chevron and the state-owned Petrobangla impact foreign investor confidence in Bangladesh.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR FISHERIES, LIVESTOCK, SCIENCE, AND IT

¶12. Manik Lal Samaddar said avian influenza (AI) is his current priority. Identifying AI as more than a health issue, he pointed out that 5 million people are employed in Bangladesh's poultry industry. Problems include the public's lack of health awareness in general and the need for minimum hygienic conditions for poultry. Samaddar noted that last year only 20 districts had been affected in total, but that in the past few months alone, AI had spread to an additional 20 districts. He said the geographic spread of AI was an alarming trend, but noted the number of infected farms was still less than 1 percent of the total number of poultry farms in Bangladesh. Samaddar noted that market demand for poultry is dropping significantly. He said there are plans for more public outreach through mass media channels, and also specific campaigns targeting wet markets and farms.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR POST, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, WELFARE

¶13. Brig. Gen. MA Malek Mollah was a reserved interlocutor; he claimed, for example, the CTG faces no significant challenges. He became more voluble when discussing issues within his purview. Mollah said the Bangladesh Telephone and Telegraph Board (BTTB) needs to compete more effectively with the private sector. He added that Bangladesh is moving toward legalizing the use of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology, to fully utilize the new fibre-optic network in the country and a new high-speed link to the Internet. According to Mollah, Bangladesh's connection to the Internet backbone has a 26 gigabits per second capacity, of

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which only 4 gigabits currently are being used. (NOTE: Bangladesh's Internet hub relies on outdated router and switch technology that limits the full use of the cable's bandwidth. Additionally, only a few of Bangladesh's commercial Internet service providers can afford the hardware for providing true broad-band access. With the licensing of VOIP technology currently underway, the use of Bangladesh's bandwidth will likely increase as more telephone calls are legally routed through the internet. END NOTE.)

INCUMBENT ADVISER GIVEN NEW PORTFOLIO, HOME AFFAIRS

¶14. (C) Until January 2008, Maj. Gen. (ret.) MA Matin was the CTG's Communications Adviser. In the recent reshuffle, Matin, who spearheaded the CTG's immediate relief efforts in the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr, was given the important and

powerful Home Affairs portfolio. As Matin noted to the CDA a.i. in their meeting, the Home Affairs Ministry is responsible for all of Bangladesh's armed forces, the police, the Rapid Action Battalion and the military. Matin said he believed in the importance of professional forces; the police, for example, are government servants responsible to the people. Matin said he was working to improve the police force so that it could be an organization trusted by the public. When the CDA raised the issue of human rights and treatment of detainees, Matin was forceful in his denunciation of custodial death and mistreatment of prisoners; he said legal action would be taken against authorities involved in any human rights violations. Matin said he was constantly monitoring the situation of high profile detainees, like former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, particularly with regard to health issues. Matin was critical of recent visits by two Canadian attorneys arranged by Hasina supporters; in Matin's view, as foreign lawyers not licensed in Bangladesh these individuals acted improperly in making public statements about Hasina's case.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: On the whole, the new advisers/assistants strike us as competent and committed -- just the type of new blood this government could use to repair its frayed image. When it comes to achieving goals in their areas of responsibility, however, these leaders may be hampered by the fact that the Caretaker Government only has about nine months left in its tenure. That may be too short a time to effect significant change in many government policies. The advisers and assistants also face a risk-averse bureaucracy that is already reluctant to make major changes for fear of reversal or retaliation by a subsequent government. All of advisers and assistants strongly and sincerely voiced their commitment to free, fair and credible elections by the end of 2008. All emphasized the importance of ensuring continuity between the CTG and a new elected government. These leaders want to see that progress made by the CTG survives its tenure and that the new government does not revert to the situation that prevailed prior to January 11, 2007. The advisers/assistants expressed support for the upcoming political dialogue and the hope that the political parties will be responsible, achievement-focused interlocutors as Bangladesh works on a plan to transition to an elected government by the end of the year. END COMMENT.
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